

**CENTRAL AUTHORITY AND REGIONAL POWER IN  
CHINA:  
ARE THERE ANY LESSONS FOR THE EUROPEAN  
UNION?**

By

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Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am delighted to be able to join you this morning at this important conference on European integration. For myself and for my colleagues from Concordia University in Canada, this occasion also signals the inauguration of a formal partnership with our new sister university, Università di GENOVA. We look forward to many years of academic cooperation between our two universities. I want to personally thank Prof. Cazale for his tremendous efforts and enthusiasm, both in organizing the conference and in arranging for our participation in it.

Let me begin my remarks this morning with the confession that I am neither a political scientist nor an economist nor a specialist on contemporary Europe. In fact, I am an historian of China with particular focus on the modern period. I began my study of China about 35 years ago and most of my work has dealt with Chinese students at home and abroad and their role in 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history. Today I have been asked to say a few words about China's long political experience, particularly the tension between central authority and regional power. I will then speak briefly to whether China's historical experience is at all relevant to European integration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

As many of you are probably aware, although Chinese history dates back 4,000 years, China was first made up of a number of semi-independent kingdoms under a dominant state in a feudal-like arrangement. It was unified under one ruler and one central government under the Qin Dynasty in about 200 B.C. For most of the next 2,200 years the Chinese political structure was dominated

by a succession of “Emperors” or “Sons of Heaven” who in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century were replaced first by a President, then by a General and during the past 50 years by a Chairman. Although the position of Emperor was a hereditary one, through a change in “the Mandate of Heaven” one dynasty periodically gave way to another for over two millennia. Both Chinese historians and Chinese rulers and their Confucian officials, influenced by the Chinese view of time as cyclical rather than lineal, noted a somewhat predictable ebb and flow of power during what came to be known as “dynastic cycles.” Over-simplifying, with a strong emperor the central bureaucracy governed China firmly; the weaker the emperor and the older the dynasty, the more inevitably power flowed to the provinces, although authority always remained with the emperor.

The principal explanation for this ebb and flow of political power between the center and the regions in China lies in China’s geography. China has been an enormous country for two

millennia. It is the third largest country in the world today. Its territory totals about 9.6 million square kilometers or about three times the size of the current 15-member European Union. Rivers (including two of the world's longest) and mountains (including the world's highest) divide China into distinct regions. Historically, some of the more remote regions have been particularly isolated and inaccessible. During World War II, for example, China's complex geography made possible the separate existence of three governments – the Nationalist's in remote Chongqing (in Southwest China); the Communist in remote Yanan (in North China); and the Japanese puppet government in the coastal regions and main inland population areas. In short, it would not be an exaggeration to say that geographically speaking, China is not naturally a country at all, but a collection of potentially distinct countries held together by political means.

Another reason for the traditional ebb and flow of political power in China has been the enormity of the population. China has

always been the most populous country in the world. Today's population of 1.3 billion people is more than three times that of the current European Union. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the population of China already exceeded 300 million, but the central government had fewer than 30,000 civil servants to govern the country and to control the population. Without a strong emperor at the helm, the geographic regions, particularly those on the periphery of the empire and some with populations larger than those of many European countries, naturally began to fall away from central control.

Given its problematic geography and daunting population, how has China been held together for more than 2,000 years? Why has it not more frequently and more permanently fragmented into its geographically distinct sub-regions? While there is no one answer to such a question, I am going to identify in the next few minutes four factors which I believe help us to understand the Chinese experience.



The Chinese language is the first factor that has held China together politically for more than two millennia. The Chinese language consists of many dialects, including Mandarin, Shanghainese, Hunanese, Cantonese and others. In traditional times it was often difficult or even impossible for Chinese speaking one dialect to understand Chinese speaking another dialect. Nevertheless, the written Chinese language has always remained the same for speakers of all dialects. Thus, an edict from the emperor or a great work of Chinese philosophy or literature could be read by educated Chinese around the country regardless of their spoken dialect. Today, as a result of a government policy to teach the Mandarin dialect in schools across China, Mandarin Chinese is spoken by nearly one billion people, more than twice the number of English-speakers worldwide. In short, communication (facilitated by a common language) has been and continues to be essential to national integration in China.

The ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the Chinese population is a second factor that has held China together politically for more than two millennia. The vast majority of Chinese (estimates run from 92% to 94%) are members of the predominant Han ethnic group. While China has many minority groups (totaling 6% to 8% of the population), they are widely scattered, including in some of China's most remote areas. As a result, historically most Chinese have had a strong sense of ethnic identity that has promoted shared values and cultural pride. China's conviction of its central place in the world led it to regard itself as the "Middle Kingdom" and outsiders as uncultured "barbarians." This Sino-centric view in turn promoted a cultural conservatism that strengthened China as a political entity, at least until the modern period.

China's ideology (whether Confucianism or Marxism/Leninism/Maoism) is a third factor that has held China together politically for more than two millennia. China has always shown a preference for "totalistic" and pervasive ideological

“packages” with political, social, economic and cultural dimensions. Among other things, this ideology has emphasized the vital role and paramount authority of the leader (the “Son of Heaven” or his contemporary equivalent at the macro level and the head of the family at the micro level); the rights of the group over those of the individual; the ideological role of education and the use of model emulation to emphasize core values; and a remarkable willingness to subordinate “rational” economic and technological goals to political and social priorities.

China’s social structure is, in my opinion a fourth factor that has held China together politically for more than two millennia. Given the size of the population overall and the density of the population along the coasts and major rivers, Chinese governments have always relied on the social structure to support the political structure. In traditional China one of the emperor’s secrets was that he had at his disposal an additional one million unofficial “bureaucrats,” *bona fide* degree holders who had passed the



official examinations, but chose not to take up government positions. Instead, they returned to a comfortable life in the countryside where as the “gentry” they served as an invisible government and source of political, legal, moral and religious authority. In times of central government weakness, these gentry and their regional leaders exercised power in China. They always did so on behalf (but never in place of) the emperor, who was the source of their legitimacy, but they did so at the expense of central power. At the same time, the emperors maintained a “mutual responsibility” system that brought government control to the level of the family and the individual. In modern China there has been a continuing reliance on para-governmental organizations of all sorts to supplement the role of the official bureaucracy. On an official level, both the Chinese Communist Party and the People’s Liberation Army have for the past 50 years performed and continue to perform certain functions in lieu of or in supplement to the government itself. Other mass organizations – for women, for youth, for workers, for writers, for virtually all groups in society -

are intended in part to ensure that every individual in China is enmeshed in a series of overlapping relationships and affiliations that promote either support of or at least obedience to the policies and laws of the Chinese government. In times of central government weakness, these para-governmental and mass organizations, particularly at the regional and local level, appear to increase their power, but their authority and legitimacy flows from the central authorities and ultimately from the “leader” of the Chinese state.

In the concluding section of my remarks, I will try to respond to our hosts who have asked me whether any of China’s experience is relevant to the European Union of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As I indicated at the beginning of my remarks, I have no expertise in European affairs. That having been said, it appears to me that the relevance of the Chinese experience depends on the ultimate goal of the architects of the European Union. If their ultimate intention is to create a centralized European state or a “federation” of states to

replace the existing autonomous states of the European Union, the Chinese experience (admittedly under very different circumstances) suggests that the multiple languages, ethnicities and cultures, ideologies and social histories of the current and prospective members of the European Union, would make such an effort difficult. At the same time, I assume that any attempt to abandon centuries, even millennia, of distinctive national traditions would be met with a great deal of political resistance. Certainly, from the Chinese perspective, no amount of cost/benefit analysis would warrant such a radical change in national identities.

What if the ultimate objective of the architects of European Union is to create a confederation of European states that respects the sovereignty of individual member nations and restricts cooperation to particular sectors, such as economic cooperation? In that case, the Chinese experience would suggest that prospects for European Union could well be brighter. The key, from the Chinese perspective, would be the degree to which such cooperation would

support or challenge the national beliefs, traditions and practices of the member states. As well, from the Chinese perspective, any such confederation would be vulnerable as soon as the demands of confederation membership clashed with the fundamental national interests and traditions of the member countries.

Another perspective on the Chinese experience, if it is indeed relevant for the European Union in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, is that it highlights four areas that perhaps deserve the attention of EU architects, particularly in their dealings with future generations of Europeans. They could focus on the vital importance of communication to national integration, possibly with increasing emphasis on a common language or languages. They could work to create an over arching European ethnicity and culture to complement traditional European ethnicities and cultures. They could foster the emergence of an inclusive, trans-national political ideology that reflects the situation in Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.



They could propose a trans-national social contract between the European Union and the citizens of its member states.

I have tried to show, as historians are inclined to do, that at least in the case of China, history is full of continuities, as well as the obvious discontinuities. There are certainly significant differences between the Chinese central government of traditional times and its attitude toward and dealings with regional power today.

Nevertheless, I have tried to demonstrate that there are significant continuities which can in part be explained by language, ethnicity and culture, ideology and social organization. I have also tried to speak briefly about the future of the European Union from the limited perspective of Chinese historical experience. I only hope that my comments, coming from one who is not a specialist on contemporary Europe, have been of some interest to you. I am looking forward to the remainder of the conference and to learning a great deal from all of you. As Dean of the Faculty of Arts &

Science at Concordia University, I also look forward to the expansion of our academic cooperation with our new partner institution and colleagues who are here from other universities. Thank you and best wishes for a successful conference!